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Start Talking

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More and more of the brutal and brutalizing Asian-style fighting is devolving on young American soldiers, and there are about half-a-million homeless and hungry refugees in South Vietnam, whose population is only 14 million. The reeling and exhausted South Vietnamese army twitches to commands of a military junta, but most of the people have no notion who is in charge in Saigon, nor do they much care. About half of them live in areas the Viet Cong controls. Not long before he was assassinated, President Kennedy stated his opinion that the government in Saigon could not win the war unless it managed to get popular support. There have been many governments there since, none has had that support, and at this late date mass enthusiasm is not likely to be generated by the arrival in Vietnam of a CIA expert in popular revolutions - Edward G. Lansdale of Philippines fame. Saigon's military leaders depend on the army, an army now sagging in defeat, and are supremely uninterested in the civilians. Though the US initially entered South Vietnam only to "advise," advice is about the least-valued American commodity in Saigon. The South Vietnamese prime minister, Marshall Nguien Cao Ky, has just taken time out to visit Formosa, though the State Department strongly urged him not to. There, wearing a gleaming white uniform, Ky proposed to Chiang Kai-shek "an alliance of anti-Communist nations in Asia to fight North Vietnam and China." He boasted that he was ready to "win the war" now that the political situation in Saigon was "stabilized." He isn't, and it isn't. The blunt truth is that continuation and, if possible, further escalation of the fighting is the only hope for the Saigon officer class: They have muddled too much, intrigued and conspired too much, estranged too many people for there to be any future for them in a South Vietnam that is restored to peace. Many of them know it, and when things get too hot they'll flit to sanctuaries they have waiting for them in France and Switzerland where their bank accounts will ensure that they do not starve like South Vietnam's refugees. Meanwhile, what have they to lose in trying to extend the war? The US would have to do most of the fighting; the Saigon officers could go on wearing white uniforms. It's a gambler's throw of dice with someone else's chips as the stakes.

But in Washington last week a different sort of gamble was in the making, having nothing to do with Marshall Ky's alliance to fight North Vietnam and China. Unmistakably, the Administration wants

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to liquidate this war, but do it without undue humiliation abroad and without inviting its own political destruction by Republicans who stand ready to lambaste the Democrats either for being too "soft" or too "hard." "Our problem," Secretary Rusk said on August 23, "is to get the other side to the conference table," to which the President on the following day added: We're ready "right now . . . at the drop of a hat." Mr. Johnson's new ambassador to the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg, was equally emphatic: "We are talking about a peace that should be negotiated here and now. Here and now." The US is willing, Mr. Johnson had earlier said, to confer with Hanoi or "any government" concerned; the presence of the Viet Cong at such talks would not pose an "insurmountable" problem. That would appear to satisfy in part the complaint voiced last spring by the Secretary-General of the National Liberation Front, who told George Chaffard of *L'Express* that, "what we reject is a conference which doesn't include us. . . . The foreign powers should content themselves with expressing suggestions, with ratifying the agreements reached among Vietnamese, and with guaranteeing its execution." Chaffard's own conclusion, after an extensive journey in "enemy territory" was that, "it is to the men of the NLF, who are fighting, that one should offer an alternative, not to Hanoi which is content merely to aid them." Aid from the North has, of course, increased since Chaffard's visit - as has American aid to Saigon, and more than aid. The war is quickly and dangerously becoming an American war against Asians, not a war between Asians.

Heretofore, US policy had been to insist on pegging peace talks to Hanoi, on the theory that the Viet Cong are puppets whose strings are pulled by North Vietnam. Hanoi similarly scoffs at Saigon as the puppet of Washington. American experience with its "puppet" suggests that the Viet Cong may well have wills of their own, a possibility that has been acknowledged by Secretary Rusk: "Not all of them [in the National Liberation Front] are Communists," he says; and moreover, "there may also be some tensions between some of the Southerners and some of the Northerners within the Liberation Front." For example, the Viet Cong, which has done the fighting, may be in no hurry for reunification which would put the South under the rule of the North. The way may be more open than some in the Administration once thought - or could ever learn by listening to what comes out of Hanoi - for a provisional coalition in South Vietnam made up of representatives of South Vietnam's Buddhists, Catholics, Montagnards, resident Chinese and Cambodians and other minorities as well as the leaders of the NLF. And looking further ahead, Secretary Rusk declares that, "we are prepared for elections in South Vietnam to determine what the people of that country want in

terms of their own institutions." The US is not going to pull out its forces as a precondition for talks; this must be understood by the National Liberation Front. Nor could there be an immediate, total US withdrawal. From time to time, however, spokesmen for the Front have hinted that a phased disengagement would do, and Washington has more than once stated repeatedly that eventual withdrawal is desirable. "We have no interest," Secretary Rusk says, "in military bases or permanent military presence in Southeast Asia." "If aggression ceases from the North," Ambassador Goldberg says, "our activities in South Vietnam will likewise cease." The gap between what is tolerable to the United States and to its foes in Vietnam narrows, though a fruitful diplomatic dialogue has yet to begin.

What more could the US do to persuade the other side to begin talking "here and now?" According to McGeorge Bundy, "we would be willing to consider cessation of the bombings if it were a step toward peace." It would be a step. Why should there not be a halt, now, to the bombing of North Vietnam and of the villages in South Vietnam suspected of harboring Viet Cong units? Very little would be lost in doing so; the bombing of North Vietnam has failed to force Hanoi to the conference table, and the bombing of wretched jungle villages seems only to make more civilians homeless; the elusive Viet Cong slips away. American troops who fight on the ground have occasionally managed to make the guerrillas stand and fight - and die - but mostly our men have wound up their forays as the abashed captors of old men, women and children, inhabiting villages to which the Viet Cong returns soon after the Americans leave.

Could not the President likewise privately inform the Secretary-General of the United Nations and other relay channels of his readiness to accept a cease-fire, "here and now," while pledging US support for a new provisional government in the South that would include the National Liberation Front? It would clarify matters too were the President to make even more explicit US endorsement of a phased withdrawal of all outside military forces in South Vietnam, and to repeat his constructive promise of some months back, that the US is prepared to contribute economic and technical assistance for the enormous tasks of reconstruction a settlement will permit.

Neither side can be expected in advance of formal talks to dot every "i" and cross every "t." But vague generalities no longer suffice. If a sustained diplomatic initiative of the kind suggested here is made, and is then rebuffed by the other side, the line of march can be predicted. This miserable war will drag on and on, to the satisfaction of no one - except possibly some officials in Saigon and Peking.

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